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THE STORIES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Every healthy-minded boy and girl loves a story. Men and women, who are simply children grown up, find an inexhaustible charm in the story literature of a people, of a race. In this short paper I purpose saying a few words about the wonderful stories which are to be found in the Old Testament, stories which are thousands of years old, which have out-last ed empires and republics, and which will last, as far as we can see,

Till the sun grows cold,
And the stars are old,
And the leaves of the Judgment
Book unfold.

What is a story? A story "is a narrative or recital of an event or series of events, whether in prose or verse, whether real or fictitious, or such narratives or recitals collectively." Where do Hebrew stories come in? We shall let Professor Moulton, the man who has done more than anyone else to reveal the literary beauty of the Bible, answer the question :

"From history," he writes, "we must, in literary analysis, distinguish story: the one is founded on the sense of record and scientific explanation of events, the other appeals to the imagination and the emotions. The story literature of most peoples is fiction, in the sense that its matter is invented solely for literary purposes. The stories of the Bible are part of the sacred history, differing only in the mode in which the matter is presented; and a long series of these stories is scattered through the historical books with nothing to distinguish them, in the ordinary versions, from the historic context."

When we come to examine the stories of the Old Testament we are amazed at their variety and extent. It is difficult to make a selection. Each one almost has some special characteristic that is worth studying. The critic finds himself in a flowery mead with roses and violets and lilies all around him each one calling to be picked and admired.

To realize the truth of what has just been said, turn to the first Book of the Bible, Genesis, and see what stories we have: The Temptation in the Garden, Cain and Abel, The Tower of

Babel, The Flood, the epic narratives which center around Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and above and beyond all others, The Story of Joseph and his Brethren.

Read on through the Books of the Pentateuch. What entrancing stories are those which tell of Moses and the Plagues of Egypt; or that striking and fascinating tale of Balaam and how he bore witness though unwillingly to the greatness and grandeur of Israel! And then when we enter the Book of Judges we find ourselves face to face with stories which are among the most interesting in the Old Testament. To recall but a few: the Feats of Gideon against the Midianites, the pathetic incident of Jephthah's Vow, the curious little history of Micah's Images and the Danite Migration, a tale which makes us think of "Lorna Doone," or the romances of Sir Walter Scott, and last, though by no means least, the Labors of Samson, the Hebrew Hercules, a name truly to be classed among the Heroes of Israel.

Continuing our examination, we next come to the Book of Ruth, one of the most exquisite idyls in all literature, an idyl we need not be ashamed to place along side those of Theocritus. Next in all their boldness and vivid character-painting come the stories of Samuel, Saul and David. There is a noble power about some of these stories which will never let them die. Professor Moulton characterizes them as epic in their strength and beauty. Then, as we pursue our reading, we meet with those wonderful stories of Elijah and Elisha, culminating in the Ordeal on Mount Carmel in the one case, and in the Doom of Gehazi, in the other. The Babylonian Captivity next claims our attention and as a result of that dark and trying time, we have a group of the most noted stories in the Bible: the stories which have as their hero, Daniel, the brave young Jew unafraid and unabashed to stand up for his faith before Nebuchadnezzar and Balshazzar, Kings of Babylon. There is also the splendid, though so seldom understood, story of Jonah. Where in any literature could there be found a more glorious protest against sectarian narrowness and bigotry than in the tale of the Son of Amittai? Lastly there is the Book of Esther, which, analyzing it from the view-point of literature, comes nearest to a religious novel of any writing in the Old Testament. Even a cursory

reader perceives the presence of a double plot: the first series of events centering around Mordecai, the second around Esther. These two are deftly woven together with the result that we have a story of absorbing interest. Against a background of oriental despotism and magnificence the figure of the fearless young Jewess stands out clear and distinct. The Book of Esther, it is hardly necessary to add, has for centuries been most widely read and admired by the Jews themselves.

Thus we see that each period of Jewish history—as we have it in the Old Testament—can furnish its quota of famous stories. From the days of the Patriarchs down to the Return from the Babylonian Captivity we have a series of stories which go a long way towards explaining why our English Bible has had such a moulding effect upon our literature and our language.

But do people care for these stories? Are they read as they once were? Deny it as we will, men and women do not read the Bible as they used to. It has become in many quarters an obsolete book. Especially is this true of the Old Testament. This mighty collection of literary masterpieces is calmly ignored by so-called educated people. Young men and women entering our colleges or who have graduated therefrom, are often so densely ignorant of the Bible that it would be ludicrous if it were not disheartening to the cause of sound education and liberal culture. The Bible is for us a great English classic. We need not apologise for it. It can easily,—if we will let it,—plead its own cause.

Let us, however, be perfectly fair in our criticism of Hebrew stories. The language of unstinted praise is rarely satisfactory. It generally fails of its object. There are stories and stories in the Old Testament. Some are by no means interesting or instructive reading. Not a few are disfigured with coarseness and teach, at best, a very dubious morality. Some are grisly with unmentionable horrors, while others are so saturated with Jewish intolerance and bigotry that we turn from them with abhorrence and disgust.

Let us frankly concede all these objections. But here is the point ever to bear in mind: what right has the objector to pick

and choose only the inferior specimens of Hebrew genius? Occupying this absurd and hypo-sensitive position we should probably have to eliminate every ancient classic. Or to come nearer home, take Shakespeare, the mightiest poet the world has ever seen. Have we to leave his works unread because, forsooth, some of his pages are disfigured with coarseness and vulgarity? From such old-maid criticism we can only pray to be delivered. It is so precisely with the stories of the Old Testament. Leave unread the dark, coarse and gruesome tales: and fasten your attention upon those stories in which are enshrined forever, Jewish faith, Jewish hope and Jewish courage.

Take one of these old stories and study it from the view-point of literature. We have been so long accustomed to read our Bibles solely for religious purposes that it will doubtless come as a surprise that one of its stories, and that not one of its most widely known, possesses a literary merit of a rare order. It is the story of Rebekah's Wooing in the Book of Genesis.

We are back in the changeless East. We enter the tent of Abraham, who at the time is old and well-stricken in age. The Patriarch is talking to his servant Eliezer upon a matter of momentous interest:

I will make thee swear by the Lord, the God of heaven, and the God of the earth, that thou shalt not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell: but thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son Isaac.

Eliezer, not unnaturally, raises an objection that the maid may be unwilling to come until she sees the man she is to marry. He therefore suggests the desirability of Isaac going along in the caravan to plead his own suit. To this Abraham fiercely objects. He must go without Isaac. If he fails it will not be his fault, and so the faithful servant sets out for Nahor, a city of Mesopotamia, with ten camels laden with presents for the prospective bride and her family.

The scene changes and we see the loyal steward resting his tired camels at a well outside the city's gate. It is evening, "the time that women go out to draw water." With an odd mixture of superstition and childish faith, Eliezer offers up a prayer to Jehovah:

O Lord God of my master Abraham, I pray thee, send me good speed this day, and shew kindness unto my master Abraham. Behold, I stand here by the well of water; and the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water: and let it come to pass, that the damsel to whom I shall say, 'Let down thy pitcher, I pray thee, that I may drink'; and she shall say 'Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also': let the same be she that thou hast appointed for thy servant Isaac; and thereby shall I know that thou hast shewed kindness unto my master!

Among the damsels who now come forward, with their pitchers upon their shoulders, is the daughter of Bethuel, Abraham's brother. The zealous servant runs forward and puts his query:

"Let me, I pray thee, drink a little water of thy pitcher."

The maiden graciously offers him her pitcher:

"Drink, my lord!"

And as though this was not enough, she adds:

"I will draw water for thy camels also, until they have done drinking."

Eliezer in the meanwhile looks on in dumb amazement. Wondering he holds his peace. Can it be that his search has already ended, that this damsel who is so fair to look upon, is to be the bride of Isaac? He must be cautious, however, and feel his way. After the camels have been attended to he takes "a golden earring of half a shekel weight" and two bracelets and proceeds to clasp them upon the white arms of Rebekah.

"Whose daughter art thou?" he asks. "Tell me, I pray thee. Is there room in thy father's house for us to lodge in?"

Rebekah answers at once:

"I am the daughter of Bethuel. We have both straw and provender enough and room to lodge in."

At this striking answer to his prayers, Eliezer can only bow his head and murmur:

Blessed be the Lord God of my master Abraham, who hath not left destitute my master of his mercy and his truth: I being in the way, the Lord led me to the house of my master's brethren.

Rebekah runs home and tells her family of the stranger at the well. She exhibits the costly presents, and Laban, her brother, shrewdly suspecting that the man must be in the pay of a rich patron hurries to Eliezer with the cry:

Come in, thou blessed of the Lord; wherefore standest thou without? for I have prepared the house, and room for the camels.

Abraham's servant accepts the invitation and enters the dwelling. His camels are looked after by attendants, and meat is placed before him. But Eliezer—a true picture of a faithful servant—remarks:

I will not eat until I have told mine errand.

Permission being granted, he rehearses all the incidents that led up to the journey and the subsequent wonderful answer to his prayer in meeting with Rebekah. Then looking Laban squarely in the face he adds:

If ye will deal kindly and truly with my master, tell me: and if not, tell me; that I may turn to the right hand or to the left.

The father and brother of Rebekah can only reply:

The thing proceedeth from the Lord: we cannot speak unto thee bad or good.

At this fruition of all his hopes Eliezer falls to the ground and worships the Lord. Then arising he takes "jewels of silver and jewels of gold" and gives them to the bride elect. Next he bestows precious gifts upon Laban and the various members of his family, for Abraham, his master, is a mighty prince and must not be thought niggardly or parsimonious. Next follows a night of rejoicing and merrymaking. But the conscientious servant is anxious to get home and so in the morning he comes to Laban with the request: "Send me away unto my master!"

The family of Rebekah, however, are loth to part with her. Naturally enough they strive to keep her for a few days; but Eliezer is importunate:

Hinder me not, seeing the Lord hath prospered my way: send me away that I may go to my master.

They call Rebekah and ask her: "Wilt thou go with this man?" "I will go," is the immediate response. Rebekah and her maidens then mount the camels and follow Eliezer.

In the meantime, Isaac, utterly unaware of the good fortune that is coming to him, like an earlier Wordsworth, goes "to

meditate in the field at the eventide ; and he lifted up his eyes, and saw and behold the camels were coming !”

But the keen-eyed bride has already seen the solitary figure.

“What man is this that walketh in the field to meet us?” she inquires of Eliezer.

“It is my master,” comes the hurried whisper.

With a quick movement Rebekah covers her face with a veil. And so they meet !

“And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife : and he loved her : and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death.”

The charm of this story is perennial. It will never grow old. It has upon it the hall mark of literary immortality. It will take its place alongside of the stories of Homer. It will lose its inspiration only when men and women cease to love each other and when marriage and the marriage relation, with its beauty, power and divine sanction, has lost its meaning, and the world is run according to the dictates and maxims of *Vanity Fair* !

There is also the story of Joseph and his Brethren, a world masterpiece. Local color, graphic character-sketching, absorbing interest, all are there. If it were not in the Bible men and women would rave over it ; but just because it is, they neglect it or completely ignore it. When you expostulate with them, they remark : “Yes, I did read it once, when I was a child ; but somehow or other I never read and re-read it as I do other favorite stories. I suppose it is so because it is in the Old Testament and we are not supposed to go to the Bible for literary charm and delight.” Is there any hope that this state of affairs will ever change ? That because a story is in the Bible, it can have no literary interest ?

A change for the better is coming, I am glad to say, despite the narrowness of those who refuse to look upon the Bible as literature, and notwithstanding the dictum of those critics whose mental horizon is limited to the books of the day and who think a petty little mannerism, a childish trick of style, is going to supersede the masterpieces of all time.

Of the critics and scholars who are trying to let the Bible tell its own story, the man above all others is Professor Moulton of

the University of Chicago, as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. He has taken the Bible out of its archaic setting and placed it where it belongs, in the forefront of the classics of the world. The whole Bible-reading world owes him a lasting debt of gratitude for his monumental work, "The Modern Reader's Bible." In the Book of Genesis, as edited by this critic, the Story of Joseph and his Brethren stands out clear and distinct. We can read it in half an hour, and if our taste has been cultivated by feeding on the best models, we can go back to it with ever increasing delight and find in its pages new interest and charm.

Finally, we may take the Story of Balaam. How many appreciate its literary value? I am perfectly aware of the extraordinary interest the story has for a preacher of righteousness. One has but to think of the sermons of Bishop Butler, Cardinal Newman and Frederick Robertson to see this, while lesser men by the score have followed these princes of the pulpit in making it the subject of their discourses. But I am not now interested in its ethical and religious value, though frankly admitting that the lessons that can be drawn from the story are legion, but in its literary worth. Read it then from this standpoint. Take down the first volume of Stanley's "Jewish Church" and see how a master of historical criticism could treat it; or better still go to the Book of Numbers and read the three chapters which tell the story.

Of its manifold beauties I shall call attention only to the wonderful poetry contained in the story. Four times Balaam breaks into song and four times we hear poetry which, though chanted thousands of years ago, can still move and thrill us:

How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob! and thy tabernacles, O Israel!

As the valleys are they spread forth, as gardens by the river's side, as the trees of lign aloes which the Lord hath planted, and as cedar trees beside the waters.

God brought him forth out of Egypt; he hath . . . the strength of an unicorn: he shall eat up the nations his enemies, and shall break their bones, and pierce them through with his arrows.

He couched, he lay down as a lion, and as a great lion: who shall stir him up? Blessed is he that blesseth thee, and cursed is he that curseth thee!

And then, turning to the enraged King of Moab, Balaam, in language that must have thrilled his hearer through and through, utters this prophecy of the Jewish People :

I shall see him, but not now : I shall behold him, but not nigh : there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth !

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